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## Shenandoah Not Without the CCC<sup>1</sup>

*During the President's brief stop at Camp Nira [Shenandoah NP CCC Camp #3], he was treated to a brief pageant entitled The burial of old man depression and fear and the return of happy days. ... two C.C.C. members, one with a banner "C.C.C." and the other with the symbol "NIRA" [National Industrial Recovery Act], marched toward a covered object labeled "fear." As the torch-bearers set fire to "fear" ... The covering destroyed, [and] "Old Man Depression" was revealed in effigy. This too was fired and the President happily commented, "that's right, burn him up." ... The bugler played "Happy Days Are Here Again" as the President ... applauded.<sup>2</sup>*

*The construction of the Stony Man/Hughes River overlook located just north of Skyland dates to 1934-1935. Note the extensive cut slope in the foreground, retained by a drylaid stone retaining wall only partially built.*

**T**his article appeared just five months after Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office during the depths of the Great Depression and three months after the first two Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps located in the national parks were established at Skyland (N.P.-1) and Big Meadows (N.P.-2). Although Shenandoah National Park's official establishment was over two years in the future, Washington saw the future park's proximity and virginity as the ideal setting for the demonstration of Roosevelt's depression cures.

The President took a whirlwind tour through the Shenandoah Valley and along the developing Skyline Drive to bolster confidence in his public

works programs. Followed by "three newsreel photographers and a corps of newspaper cameramen,"<sup>3</sup> Roosevelt ensured that the uplifting image of Shenandoah's CCC camps was flashed around the world. Shenandoah National Park, long before it was born, was officially baptized by the CCC.

Between May 11, 1933, and March 31, 1942, 10 CCC camps were established within, or on leased land adjacent to, Shenandoah. At any one time, more than 1,000 boys and young men lived in camps supervised by the Army and worked on projects directed by the Service and the Bureau of Public Roads.

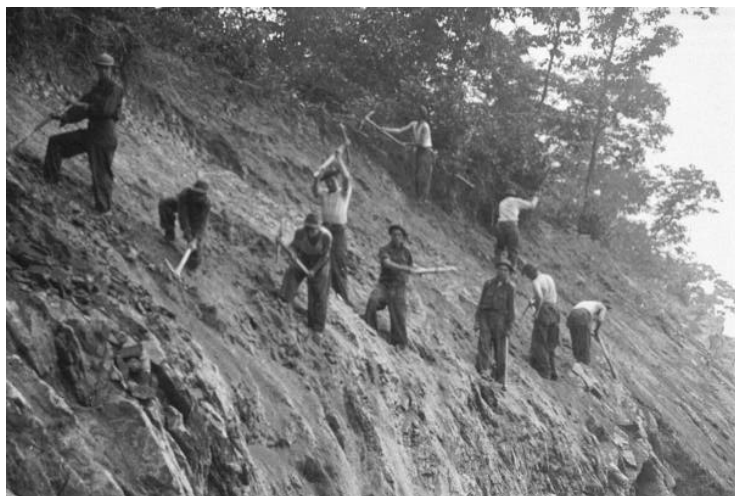
Until the park was established officially on December 26, 1935, the bulk of CCC activity took place on the narrow 100 foot right-of-way of the Skyline Drive, in the few areas of purchased or donated land transferred to the federal government by the Commonwealth of Virginia, or on leased lands. Thus, the earliest park development was concentrated at the available 6,400-acre 19th-century resort Skyland, at the lands adjacent to Herbert Hoover's Rapidan River fishing camp, and at Big Meadows, where the Commonwealth had purchased most of the existing land. The earliest CCC projects were concerned with building trails, fire roads and towers, log comfort stations, construction projects associated with the Skyline Drive, and picnic grounds within this narrow corridor.

By the close of 1934—and after the settlement of a Supreme Court suit challenging the constitutionality of Virginia's blanket condemnation of lands to create the park—the Commonwealth took title to the 176,429 acres that would be accepted by the federal government once Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes was satisfied that the park would be cleared of residents. However, from this time on, by letter of authority from Virginia, the Service initiated CCC projects throughout the future park area. These projects fall into the broad categories of facilities development, roads and trails construction, and landscape architecture and engineering.

To accomplish these objectives, by 1935 the CCC had in place a sawmill that produced the materials to construct park buildings (most often from chestnut cut from trees killed over a decade earlier by the blight), a shingle mill to produce the characteristic hand-made concrete tiles simulating wood shingles used on many of Shenandoah's buildings, a blacksmith shop turning out hinges, latches, sign brackets, and tools, and a sign shop producing the hand-routed chestnut signboards emulating the standards established for the western parks. Plant nurseries were established at the camps at Front Royal and Big Meadows to grow



Much of the early CCC work consisted of “flattening” slopes adjacent to the Skyline Drive. Under direct supervision of Harvey Benson, park Landscape Architect, many of the early design details—limited by the 100’ right-of-way—were corrected.



Roosevelt’s “Tree Army” quarried the stone and assisted the LEMs (locally employed men) in constructing the stone guard walls, stone headwalls, and stone gutters along the length of Skyline Drive.



seeds collected from trees within the park and to “heel-in” plants purchased from commercial nurseries or obtained from other parks—materials to be used to revegetate areas disturbed by construction.

Supervised by Harvey Benson, landscape architect for the Skyline Drive and subsequently for Shenandoah National Park, the CCC boys went back to correct initial design failings of the 100 foot right-of-way of the Skyline Drive. Cut and fill slopes were flattened; horizontal and vertical curves were adjusted; overlooks, not possible in the earlier design, were constructed; guardrails, guard walls, and stone gutters were built; and all disturbed areas were landscaped with trees, shrubs, and herbaceous materials—some from park nurseries, some from commercial sources, and many transplanted from other developed areas.

Recent research suggests that no area within immediate view of the Skyline Drive, in fact, is natural. The CCC “improved” the Skyline Drive corridor by removing dead chestnuts, thinning the understory and removing deadwood for fire control, removing the vectors for pine bark blister

## CCC Projects

### *Facilities Development*

- All initial park utilities including septic systems, water lines, wells, electrical and telephone systems, and the construction of spring boxes
- Six picnic grounds with parking for 757 cars, 107 fireplaces, 370 picnic tables, 30 water fountains, and six comfort stations
- Park maintenance facilities at both Luray and Big Meadows
- Roads, parking areas, and landscaping at the concession areas at Skyland, Elkwallow, Thornton Gap, and Dickey Ridge

### *Roads and Trails*

- Dozens of miles of fire roads to service wooden fire towers
- Relocation of almost the entire 96-mile length of the Appalachian Trail due to Skyline Drive construction disturbance; 22 trail shelters and huts constructed by, or with assistance from, the CCC
- Hundreds of miles of bridle and pedestrian trails

### *Landscape Architecture and Engineering*

- Correction of erosion created by the construction of Skyline Drive by using over 100,000 worker days to “flatten” slopes, install facines to stabilize slopes, and plant 300,000 trees and shrubs—a majority grown in park nurseries—along the Drive
- Dozens of miles of stone-lined gutters and approximately 1,113 carefully detailed stone head walls of six designs to channel runoff from paved surfaces or to direct the flow from springs and seeps on slopes uphill from the Skyline Drive
- More than 11 miles of chestnut log guard rails on the Drive, and miles more at picnic areas and campgrounds
- 43 miles of stone guardwall [assisted by locally employed men (LEMs)]
- Most of the 69 overlooks on the Skyline Drive
- Creation of drive-by vistas for which the Drive was famed, either by selective clearing of existing vegetation or by framing views with newly planted trees and shrubs



Life on the mountain was not easy for the CCC enrollees. They contended with rattlesnakes, regimentation, summer heat and humidity, and (as shown in this photo taken at Big Meadows camp NP-3 during the winter of 1933-1934) frigid cold.

The CCC experience, however, did include education and recreation. This photo shows enrollees learned to dance, possibly prior to one of the many well-chaperoned dances in near-by Luray, Front Royal, or Elkton. Many of the boys married local girls and settled down near the park.

rust, attempting to eliminate *Ailanthus altissima* (a largely futile eight-year campaign) and trying to reestablish "relic" and/or "vestigial" plants (in some cases today's rare, threatened, and endangered species). These efforts all were part of Benson's careful creation of "natural" vistas and varied topographic features along the length of the Drive and within the developing visitor use areas.

The impact of CCC projects within Shenandoah on the then extant natural and cultural resources may be gauged in review of the projects undertaken by a single camp during the autumn and winter of 1934-1935:

Reduction of fire hazards Pinnacle Mtn. 300 acres ... roadside cleanup Skyline Drive 3 miles, campground clearing [of trees and shrubs] Sexton [Pinnacles] 40 acres, horse trail Pinnacle[s] to Marys Rock 3 miles, Trailside cleanup same 3 miles; landscaping, fine grading Skyline drive 200 cubic yards, sodding 2 acres, moving and plant trees Skyline drive 1,000 trees and shrubs; telephone line Thornton Gap to Stony Man 7 miles, other campground facilities and park area signs, boundary, etc. ....<sup>4</sup>

After the official establishment of the park in 1935, CCC activities were expanded to include the entire acreage. Except on the few dozen properties where residents were given life estates, the charge of the CCC boys was to remove all evidence of human occupation (in spite of official policy that some of these homes were to be preserved and restored for interpretation). Houses and outbuildings were dismantled for salvage materials for resettlement community struc-

tures or were burned, fences were removed, gardens and orchards were obliterated, and the work areas were replanted, seeded, or sodded. Many known 20th-century occupation sites in Shenandoah are invisible today due to the CCC's mandate to return the land to its "natural state."

Serious examination of the efforts of the Civilian Conservation Corps within Shenandoah National Park challenge us to reevaluate our traditional definition and understanding of natural processes and "natural" parks.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Benson, Harvey P., Shenandoah's Resident Landscape Architect from 1935-1942, noted in "The Skyline Drive, A Brief History of a Mountaintop Motorway," *The Regional Review*, Vol IV, No.2, 1940, that "Much of this work by the Service ... never could have been accomplished without ... the Civilian Conservation Corps."
- <sup>2</sup> Unidentified newspaper clipping, August \_\_, 1933, Zerkel file, #4143, 10F5, Shenandoah National Park Archives (hereinafter SNPA)
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Period reports of E.C.W. camps, 4th period, October 1, 1934-March 31, 1935, SNPA, summarized by Darwin Lambert in file notes, folder "Roosevelt & CCC, p.2

*Reed Engle has spent the last few years at Shenandoah working with the Washington Office, the Philadelphia Support Office, the Northeast Museum Services Center, and the Valley Forge Center for Archeology to inventory and evaluate Shenandoah's cultural resources. In the past year, the Skyline Drive has been entered on the National Register, a Historic Resource Study completed, and SAIP-funded archeological survey of three hollows implemented.*

Photos copied by John Amberson, courtesy Shenandoah National Park Archives.

